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William Casey Was More Than Roguish

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PART OF THE American public and its political elite is crucially alienated from the political system as it exists. The actions of William Casey of the Central Intelligence Agency, as revealed — or purportedly revealed since there are denials — by Bob Woodward of *The*

By William Pfaff

Washington Post, are the consequences.

If what Mr. Casey did had merely been his own rogue projects, they would not be worth taking so seriously, but of course they were much more. They faithfully reflected beliefs fundamental to the larger policies of the Reagan Administration. They pose a problem which critics of that administration must recognize — the perceived dilemma of people who passionately believe that the democratic majority in the United States, by its unwillingness to countenance an adventuresome and interventionist secret policy, jeopardizes democracy's survival.

It has been apparent for some time that the administration was doing all that it could to evade congressional restrictions on clandestine operations, particularly those directed against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua — considered by Mr. Casey "an occupied country" in a war, and "not even an undeclared war," between the Soviet Union and the West.

Until Iranagate it was possible to

believe that the administration nonetheless was staying within the letter of the law, or of what it willfully construed to be the letter of the law. Since the Iran-contra hearings we know otherwise. It operated outside the law, and Mr. Casey wanted to make such an arrangement permanent by setting up a non-official secret service to be at the personal disposal of the president and himself — in Lt. Col. Oliver North's phrase, an "off-the-shelf, self-sustaining, stand-alone" secret service. Mr. Casey allegedly put such a group together to attempt the murder of the leader of the Hezbollah Party in Lebanon. He succeeded only in murdering 80 passers-by.

The United States has arrived at a point where people elected or appointed to execute the law find the law itself an obstacle to a mission which they believe history, rather than the public, has confided to them. Mr. Casey, Colonel North, Rear Adm. John Poindexter, plus those working with them, and the very large number of people who heatedly defend what they have done, all consider themselves agents of a nobler cause than either the law or the Congress provides.

People who believe they possess a mission beyond the constraints of law and duly expressed public opinion will not be stopped by more laws. Those who believe, as did Mr. Casey, that the world is in a great crisis, that a third world war is already waged in the shadows, that it is the 1930s all over again, will conclude that those who write laws restraining American secret operations must be fools, or duped by the enemy, or appeasers, or collaborators under the enemy's sway. They will believe that breaking or evading the law is for heroes, and that one day they will be understood and cheered for having done so.

It is a bad road that the United States has been traveling. A certain capability for covert action is necessary to modern governments, and used intelligently this can serve the common good — although the record of intelligent use is not very impressive even among those, like Britain and France, who order these things better than the United States has been able to do.

The CIA has itself to blame for part of the trouble it has experienced. A lack of strict professional conscience in the past led it into crimes and follies meant to please presidents — Kennedy, Johnson.

Nixon — willing to turn a blind eye to illegality. That exploded on the Agency in the early 1970s and left it under strict new rules.

CIA scruples since then were responsible for Mr. Casey's plan to create still another agency outside the law, and for the bizarre transformation of the National Security Council into a covert operations agency. The CIA can't be blamed, although it will undoubtedly pay part of the price.

The larger problem is that a part of U.S. opinion and a part of U.S. national leadership are so convinced of imminent — even apocalyptic — world crisis that the American system no longer suits them. They want a president free to act, so long as he is in office, without restraint in foreign relations, and without accounting to Congress. They can't now have it because the United States

Constitution doesn't allow it. Thus they have disregarded the law in the conviction that world crisis confers on them a right to unconstitutional action.

This, of course, has been subversive of representative government and of the Constitution but they justify it, saying we are all on the brink of totalitarian conquest under which law and the Constitution would well and truly collapse.

One can understand what these people believe, and why, but it is useless to argue with them, to tell them that they are destroying what they claim to be protecting. They are patriots, in their way, but they are zealots; in the end, they are not in democracy's camp but in the other. This is too bad for them; but if they had their way it could also prove too bad for the rest of us.